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Article

Why We Should Be Curious about Each Other

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Abstract: Is curiosity a virtue or a vice? Curiosity, as a disposition to attain new, worthwhile information, can manifest as an epistemic virtue. When the disposition to attain new information is not manifested virtuously, this is either because the agent lacks the appropriate motivation to attain the information or because the agent has poor judgement, seeking information that is not worthwhile or seeking information by inappropriate means. In the right circumstances, curiosity contributes to the agent's excellence in character: it is appropriate to praise the agent for being curious, blame the agent for not being curious, and also prompt the agent to cultivate such curiosity, at least in some of the relevant contexts. We believe curiosity can also manifest as a moral virtue when it helps an interpreter view a speaker as an agent with a valuable perspective on the world. Especially in interactions where either there is a marked power imbalance between interpreter and speaker, or interpreter and speaker have identity beliefs that lead them to radically different worldviews, curiosity can help foster mutual understanding, and prevent the interpreter from dismissing, marginalizing, or pathologizing the speaker's perspective.

Keywords: curiosity; agential stance; epistemic virtue; moral virtue; mutual understanding

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1. What Is Curiosity?

Some philosophers think of curiosity as an emotion because it is manifested in feelings, physiological arousal, and facial expressions, and can sustain the motivation to act in a certain way [1]. Specifically, curiosity leads people to fill newly discovered gaps in information, and thus it is thought to support learning and encourage the exploration of new sources. For other philosophers, curiosity is predominantly a desire, and has been defined as "a drive to know" [2] or a desire for the acquisition of new worthwhile information [3]. Some authors have already argued that curiosity can be an epistemic and moral virtue [4–6].

In this paper, following Elias Baumgarten [7], we mostly view curiosity as a disposition to attain new information that can manifest in *epistemically* virtuous behaviors. We also suggest that curiosity plays a special role in our mutual interactions, and thus can manifest in *morally* virtuous behaviors. As Baumgartner observes, the word "curiosity" comes from the Latin *cura* which can be translated as "care" or "concern" [7]. The word's etymology is relevant to the notion of curiosity that we aim to develop here: when curiosity is directed towards other people's experiences, it manifests as a form of caring. In a social exchange, an interpreter adopts the *agential stance* towards a speaker when the interpreter sees the speaker as an agent who has a valuable perspective on the world [8]. When the speaker's report is likely to be dismissed by the interpreter because the speaker has less authority or credibility than the interpreter, the interpreter's curiosity about the speaker can prevent the interpreter from dismissing the speaker's report. When the speaker reports a view that is not shared by the interpreter, the interpreter's curiosity about how the speaker arrived at that view may not resolve the disagreement but can lead to a further exchange of information resulting in enhanced mutual understanding. This in turn makes it less likely that the speaker's perspective is marginalized or pathologized.

Here is a plan of the paper. In Section 2, we consider how we find both negative and positive evaluations of curiosity in the philosophical literature [9]. Curiosity has been described as a vice and as a virtue. A curious attitude may take people too far in the pursuit of new information, making them disregard constraints and rules, disobey, and transgress. Eve in the Garden of Eden is thought to exemplify these costs of curiosity at the extreme. More contemporary versions of this idea are ubiquitous in novels and films, where an act of *hubris* is performed by mad scientists and lone heroes who fail to recognize their personal limits and end up having to pay a high price for their thirst for knowledge. Curiosity as a virtue is associated with a love of knowledge and a desire for inquiry, and with the explorations of innovators.

In Section 3 we ask what conditions need to be met so that the disposition to acquire new information can count as a virtue. The distinctive character of the curious person is valuing knowledge in its own right, without specific concerns with what practical advantages can be derived from that knowledge. That is probably why curiosity is often an attribute of scholars. However, curiosity is also associated with the frivolity and superficiality of gossip or the desire to know about other people's experiences for the purpose of judging, alienating, or excluding them. That is why having a curious disposition can manifest as a virtue, but this is not always the case: for curiosity to manifest as a virtue, the sought information must be of the type that is worth attaining, the motivation for attaining it must be a noble one, and the agent must exercise good judgement in pursuing new information.

In Section 4, we argue that curiosity can manifest as an epistemic and moral virtue in social interactions where mutual understanding is threatened. To support our point, we offer two examples: (1) interactions in clinical encounters characterized by strong power imbalances, where the patient is at risk of being objectified and silenced; and (2) conversations between agents who have apparently irreconcilable identity beliefs and different values, where the opponent's views are at risk of being pathologized or marginalized because there is no identifiable common ground.

2. A Brief History of Curiosity

In an article defending the view that Nietzsche was a virtue epistemologist, Mark Alfano quotes Nietzsche as saying that curiosity is the most agreeable of all vices. The form of curiosity Nietzsche considered a virtue was "an insatiable desire to solve novel, difficult problems and puzzles, and to discover or invent them when none are ready to hand" [10]. Nietzsche's enthusiasm for curiosity is especially interesting for Alfano, because curiosity has not otherwise had a very good press in the philosophical literature.

Alfano notices that curiosity is often presented as a vice: in particular, Christian thinkers see it as the trait responsible for Adam and Eve's original sin. It is curiosity that is responsible for their eating from the tree of knowledge and falling from heaven. This is a recurrent theme, that curiosity leads people to attaining knowledge or wisdom that they should not aim to attain. By indulging in their curiosity, people fail to recognize their own limits [11]. When we read the Bible the story of how Eve comes to eat the prohibited fruit of the tree of knowledge, we realize that her motivation for doing so may be aptly described in terms of curiosity:

> "Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God really say, "You must not eat from any tree in the garden"?' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden', but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die'. 'You will not certainly die', the serpent said to the woman. 'For God knows that when you eat from it *your eyes will be opened*, and you will be like God, *knowing good and evil'*. When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, *and also desirable for gaining wisdom*, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then,

> the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realised they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves." (Genesis 3:1–7 [12], our emphasis).

When the effects of eating the fruit are presented as "having one's eyes opened", "knowing good and evil", and "gaining wisdom", it is not surprising that Eve's drive to know is what makes eating the fruit appealing. However, eating the fruit leads to the "fall of the whole human race" [13]. Christian writers such as Augustine [14] and Aquinas [15] consistently describe curiosity as dangerous, sinful, and vain, associating it with pride. In subsequent critiques of curiosity, up to the seventeenth century, the idea that being curious leads to people becoming proud—due to their acquired knowledge—is ubiquitous. And much more recently, in the growing literature on the attitudes that are responsible for people endorsing conspiracy theories, one contender is the tendency that some people have to "do their own research" rather than follow expert opinion [16]. This attitude seems to combine curiosity with epistemic arrogance.

A change of attitude towards curiosity, from a form of hubris to a commendable desire for learning, is advocated by Francis Bacon, who defends in his writings the usefulness of knowledge [17]. However, even Bacon insists on the distinction between knowledge sought *for vain curiosity*, which is likely to give rise to pride, and knowledge sought *for the purposes of charity and philanthropy*, which is an appropriate and morally laudable aim. A wholehearted acceptance of curiosity comes from Thomas Hobbes who describes curiosity as a *morally neutral appetite for knowledge*, suggesting that it is one of the characteristics distinguishing humans from nonhuman animals [18]. Gradually, with the Enlightenment, curiosity gains some respectability as a foundation for science and, in the current philosophical literature, it is frequently presented as an epistemic virtue.

What does it mean that curiosity is a *virtue*? To consider curiosity a virtue means that it contributes to excellence in character, and that, in at least some of the relevant contexts, it is appropriate to praise agents for being curious, blame them for lacking curiosity, and also encourage them to cultivate curiosity. This is what underlies the focus on curiosity in schools and academic institutions, where educators are meant to "facilitate, encourage and nurture" the motivation to acquire epistemic goods in their students [6] and universities often present themselves as "champions of curiosity" [9]. One concern is that in educational settings curiosity is superficially endorsed and not critically examined.

What is it for curiosity to be an *epistemic* virtue? All epistemic virtues are aimed at "improving epistemic standing" in terms of enhancing the person's own or other people's understanding or knowledge [6]. But each epistemic virtue contributes to this general aim in a distinctive way. Curious agents are motivated to acquire new epistemic goods if they believe that such goods are worthwhile. Often the motivation to acquire epistemic goods is demonstrated by the person's willingness to pay some cost for the epistemic goods to be acquired. Indeed, in our example of curiosity from the *Genesis*, Eve paid a high cost for the knowledge of good and evil that she attained by eating the prohibited fruit. She had to leave the Garden of Eden with Adam, and was punished by God, together with all women after her, by experiencing pain in childbirth.

The interesting thing about curiosity, in our view, is how it straddles being an epistemic virtue and a moral virtue. Curiosity is characterized by an interest in epistemic goods. When these goods are information about other *people* and their *perspectives*, though, curiosity is instrumental to people's capacity to build connections with others and empathize with the experiences of others, pursuing a socially flourishing life based on genuine regard for others. Curiosity can therefore contribute to the excellence of both moral and intellectual character [19]. Curiosity can be thought of as a disposition to think, feel, and act in ways which are conducive to gaining epistemic goods, including information about other people's perspectives that leads to enhanced understanding. This in turn can improve relationships. We hope to demonstrate how transformative this can be, when done well, in Section 4.

3. Is Curiosity Ever a Vice?

Thinking of curiosity as a virtue invites us to consider the Aristotelian idea of what the extremes of *excess* and *deficiency* could be which flank each side of the trait, representing vices. When the desire for knowledge is *deficient*, we get an intellectually lazy and small-minded person. When the desire for knowledge is *excessive*, we get a nosy person who indulges in gossip, or a mad scientist who puts others at risk in the name of extending their knowledge. Although some argue that curiosity can be a virtue [20] or a vice [3], it is not clear to us that curiosity is ever a vice. A closer look at the various dimensions of epistemic virtues and vices can help us appreciate that the traits associated with curiosity can fail to be virtuous without being vicious.

Jason Baehr argues that intellectual virtues are strengths of character that have something like truth, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom as their aim, and contribute to a person's worth [19]. He also identifies four dimensions of virtues (competence, motivation, judgement, and affect) which need to be in place for a trait to count as virtuous. Baehr considers the possibility that agents have an intellectual vice only if they are defective with respect to all four dimensions of an intellectual virtue. But, in the end, he rejects this picture because he finds that there are certain deficiencies in motivation and judgement that are more important than others.

In terms of *competence*, skill underlies a virtuous trait. Baehr suggests that, in the case of curiosity, the competent person is able to ask the right questions [19]. In the interpersonal context, this is the perhaps the first barrier which faced by the would-be curious interpreter; lacking the skills to know which questions to ask, and how to ask them, in order to gain worthwhile and insightful information about the speaker. Lacking competence may be a reason for an agent to fail to have the virtue of curiosity without necessarily having a vice, and in particular without having a vice of curiosity.

Second, the virtuous agent needs *appropriate motivation*. If agents wanted to learn about the world and other people's perspectives just to be praised and admired for their knowledge or to manipulate other people's behavior for personal gain, they would not have the virtue of curiosity. The virtue of curiosity requires that agents attain knowledge (or some other epistemic good) due to their love for knowledge. Interpreters who want to find out about the speaker's perspective to undermine it or ridicule it do exemplify a vice. But the vice is something other than curiosity and rather a kind of malevolence—a use of newly acquired knowledge for the purpose of harming others. Inappropriate motivation of this sort can give rise to what seems an excess of curiosity; being nosy and gossiping, for instance. Small-mindedness may give rise to a deficiency of curiosity in the passive and dismissive agent. These inappropriate motivations may lead to vicious behaviors but the vice does not lie in the trait of curiosity.

The third dimension of curiosity is *judgement*: agents need to exercise practical wisdom in their pursuit. The need for good judgement and practical wisdom in the exercise of virtue is exemplified by the fact that we do not attribute the virtue of courage to a person perpetrating a terrorist attack or the virtue of curiosity to a person who follows us home to discover where we live. In the case of curiosity, exercising judgement may be a matter of identifying a deserving epistemic goal, knowing when it is appropriate for the agent to pursue that epistemic goal, and establishing to what extent the goal should be pursued. Agents' lack of judgement can be an obstacle to their desire for knowledge being virtuous, but does not always mean that they have a vice. We shall return to this point shortly.

Finally, we come to the *affective dimension* of virtues, meaning that the virtuous agent needs to take pleasure in the pursuit of the virtue. So, the curious agent derives pleasure and satisfaction from the exercise of the relevant competence and from gaining the desired epistemic goods. The absence of these feelings of pleasure and satisfaction seems to suggest that the person's trait is not a virtue, but does not amount to a distinct vice. However, Baehr argues that willful ignorance, a lack of interest in the relevant competence, or a twisted pleasure in disregarding epistemic goods may amount to a vice if the agent is responsible for bringing about or preserving those attitudes. In essence though, lack of

affect and competence merely suggests that the disposition to know is not a virtue, whereas deficiencies in motivation and judgement more easily give rise to vices, though it is not the disposition to know itself to count as a vice in those cases.

An example can help illustrate our suggestion that a desire for knowledge can be less than virtuous without being a vice. There is some debate over how acceptable it is to ask people where they are from if there is some indication that they are foreign—where their being foreign may be indicated by their race, accent, cultural references, and so on. On some accounts, the question is motivated by the desire to know more about that person, a sort of healthy and friendly curiosity. On other accounts, the question can be seen as alienating and intrusive, potentially aimed at excluding and objectifying the other, and thus an instance where the desire to know ought to be reined in.

The agent who desires knowledge and has competence, appropriate motivation, and good judgement should be able to ascertain whether asking the question is the right thing to do, depending on the context and the nature of the interaction. Is the other person a stranger or a good friend? Are their origins something they are likely to want to talk about? Is the question something they might often be asked? The agent who is curious in a virtuous way should be able to draw on their previous experience and their current knowledge of the situation in order to inquire about other people's life history and culture with sensitivity.

In order to have the virtue of curiosity, our curious agent needs to be skilled in asking questions, derive pleasure from attaining the relevant knowledge, exercise good judgement, and be appropriately motivated to gain knowledge—there is no intention to alienate or exclude. If the agent asks someone where they come from without carefully considering the implications of the question, then we may wonder whether the agent lacks the virtue of curiosity or is curious in a vicious way. There are a few possibilities to consider here, which affect whether there is merely an absence of virtue or a vice. There may be something naïve and immature about the questioner who isn't picking up on cues about the best way to express their desire for knowledge. If the questioner continues over time to ask about provenience in an insensitive way, this entrenched insensitivity could signal that there is a systemic failure somewhere, perhaps in judgement or motivation. At best the questioner fails to be curious in a virtuous way, and at worst the behavior reflects another vice—such as malevolence. This does not seem to make *curiosity as such* a vice, but rather points to a different vice which looks superficially like or feeds off curiosity.

However, another option is that the virtue of curiosity is simply underdeveloped at that time, and so the insensitive questioning is not necessarily entrenched. Perhaps the agent has been lacking in opportunities to practice respectful questioning exchanges up to this point. Think about the child who learns more deeply how to manifest proper generosity, acting with a genuine and more mindful concern for the well-being of the other person, rather than from a well-intentioned keenness 'to help' which is nevertheless overbearing and unhelpful. Similarly, our questioner needs to learn to exercise curiosity whilst keeping concern for the other's wellbeing still very much at the heart of the exchange, mindfully navigating options and using good judgement. This agent may be said to have some degree of curiosity, but not the virtue of curiosity, because the disposition needs to be exercised with better judgement and more practical wisdom. When it comes to motivation, when pursuing valuable, personal knowledge about another person, the questioner should be mindful of the other agent's wellbeing. Note that either of these deficiencies of judgement and motivation could affect the *reliability* of the curious disposition, which determines whether the disposition attains the status of a virtue. Those lacking in wisdom and mindful motivation are likely to overlook opportunities to gain worthwhile knowledge. However, unless malevolence is involved, there is no vice.

So, in this picture of curiosity as a moral and epistemic virtue, curiosity encompasses the agent's skill for asking worthwhile questions, the agent's motivation to gain epistemic goods for their own sakes whilst respecting other agents, the agent's pleasure in the pursuit of knowledge, and the agent's good judgement in exactly how to go about pursuing

knowledge (e.g., what questions to ask or how to ask questions). If one of these elements were lacking, the virtue of curiosity would be absent, but not all deviations lead to the same outcomes. If the agent has a poor motivation for pursuing knowledge, then they might have some vice which we argue is not curiosity (such as malevolence). Whereas it is easy to identify the right motivation, as the agent must want attain knowledge for knowledge's sake, it is difficult to establish how reliable the disposition must be, and how wisely the agent must manifest it, for the drive to know to qualify as the virtue of curiosity. If our questioner is skilled, well-motivated, and enjoys gaining epistemic goods, but lacks good judgement and is insensitive, their bad judgement and insensitivity may either be a sign that there is some poorly discerned vice present or that the disposition to know need to be practiced further. In the latter case, the agent needs to learn how to express their curiosity with good judgement, so that the case of potentially insensitive questions such as "Where do you come from?" is navigated wisely. Unless there is some vice inhibiting the development of the disposition to know, temporary insensitivity amounts to a failure to have the virtue of curiosity rather than a vice.

In what follows, we want to offer two illustrations of how curiosity can have distinct advantages in social interactions and exchanges characterized by epistemic challenges. In both cases, curiosity as a disposition to attain new worthwhile information is manifested virtuously in the agential stance. What do we mean by "is manifested"? Let us use an analogy. Just as the disposition to give is manifested virtuously in donating money to a charity, so the disposition to attain new, worthwhile information is manifested virtuously in inquiring about another person's perspective on the world. Making a donation to a charity is an expression of generosity and adopting the agential stance is an expression of curiosity. Clearly, the disposition is not sufficient for the action. It is not sufficient to be generous for making a donation. Availability of funds to donate is also necessary for the donation to take place. Similarly, it is not enough to be curious to value the other person as an agent with a valuable perspective on the world. Adopting the agential stance also requires a recognition that the other can form their own perspective.

The disposition is not even necessary for the action. A wealthy politician can donate money to charity to gain popularity and a teacher can value a pupil's view on the world without being motivated to learn how the pupil arrived at that view. However, when there is a donation motivated by generosity, the donation expresses generosity. And when there is a successful interaction between people who are motivated to know each other's perspective on the world and view each other as agents, their attitudes express curiosity.

So, adopting the agential stance is an epistemically and morally virtuous manifestation of the disposition of being curious. Here, curiosity has benefits that are epistemic in so far as an interpreter's curious disposition furthers an understanding that could not be attained if the speaker's perspective were unheard, dismissed, marginalized, or pathologized. But the curious disposition also carries distinctive benefits that are moral in so far as it promotes better social interactions, avoiding the negative effects of exclusion and polarization.

4. The Agential Stance as an Expression of Curiosity

Baumgartner argues that curiosity translates into a special kind of caring that people demonstrate for each other when they are not necessarily in a close relationship [7]. His example is that of a teacher who notices how a pupil reacts towards a certain topic discussed in class, taking the time to ask 'Why?'. Baumgartner suggests that curiosity sustains a form of engagement which has both knowledge and caring as its positive outcomes, vindicating curiosity as an epistemic and moral virtue. Here, we would like to offer two cases where curiosity is manifested in the agential stance.

4.1. Curiosity against Silencing: "What Is Your Perspective?"

The first case we consider is an interaction between interpreter and speaker where there is a strong power imbalance: the speaker seeks support, and the interpreter has the means to provide that support via their status, role, experience, or expertise (child/parent;

student/teacher; patient/doctor; etc.). We argue that it is an epistemic and moral benefit if both parties, but especially the party invested with more power, can feel and express curiosity towards the other party's perspective, enabling a genuine exchange of views.

One type of encounter that is characterized by a significant power differential between parties is the *clinical encounter*. On the one side, there is a person who is potentially vulnerable and needs support (patient) and on the other side, there is a person in a position of authority who can offer, or is the gateway to, the required support (healthcare practitioner). Typically, in these encounters, the patient presents with a problem and has, at best, experience of how the problem affects themselves, whereas the healthcare practitioner is an expert, thanks to their training and their clinical experience, in identifying the causes of the problem and proposing solutions.

Exchanges between patients and practitioners can go well or badly. When encounters go well, they enhance trust and are conducive to patients seeking help in the future. When they go badly, they undermine trust. This may result into patients failing to comply with the suggested treatment or avoiding healthcare services when a new crisis occurs. In what we may want to describe as *bad* conversations between practitioners and patients, the practitioner does not solicit detailed descriptions of the problem and does not fully engage with the patient's report of the situation. For instance, in some mental health encounters, clinicians may not look at the patient directly, they provide minimal verbal feedback, and avoid answering the patient's direct questions: "When patients attempted to present their psychotic symptoms as a topic of conversation, the doctors hesitated and avoided answering the patients' questions, indicating reluctance to engage with these concerns" [21]. This reluctance may have many reasons, and some may be justified in a particular clinical context, but it communicates to the patient that the practitioner does not want to engage with the patient's perspective. In studies on patient experience, disengagement is often described as a lack of curiosity, and lived experience advisors explicitly mention the practitioner's curiosity as something that would dramatically improve patient satisfaction. Further, patients would be prepared to disclose more useful information about their condition if they had reasons to believe that practitioners were interested in hearing more.

In what we may consider as *good* conversations between practitioners and patients, the practitioner shows interest in the person's experiences and asks more details about such experiences in order to understand the symptoms better and have a better sense of what can benefit the patient moving forward: "Psychiatrists commonly [. . .] explored the impact of the symptoms on the patients' behaviour and functioning, and also questioned the validity of the beliefs by directly challenging them or offering alternative explanations" [22]. It is interesting that in this passage, the curious attitude of the practitioner is described as a form of *exploration* and it does not imply acceptance. The curious practitioner engages with the patient's reports but need not agree with the patient's description of their health journey. Active engagement starts with listening and exploring further but can also manifest as "directly challenging" or "offering alternative explanations".

Thus, not the only difference, but one very important difference between bad and good conversations is whether the practitioner is curious about the patient's experiences and communicates such curiosity. Is the practitioner's curiosity clearly expressed in the exchange with the patient? The practitioner's interest can become apparent when attentive listening and open questioning are used. Conversations flow well and the patient is open to disclose more when they feel heard and understood and detect engagement in the practitioner's verbal and non-verbal behavior. However, conversations fail to flow and are full of pauses and silences when practitioners do not show appropriate motivation, and act as if their only goal is to go through a box-ticking exercise for the purposes of identifying possible treatment options or completing a risk assessment.

As we saw, curiosity as an epistemic virtue involves having the appropriate motivation to seek new information. It also involves good judgement: being motivated to seek valuable information is not sufficient. The agent needs to know when and how it is appropriate to

pursue this valuable information. Showing empathy and interest in what the patient has to say encourages the patient to share their own experiences and makes the patient feel that they are right in seeking support from services. This enables both practitioner and patient to have a better exchange and pursue the epistemic goods their exchange can offer.

But here, curiosity has also moral pay-offs: when the patient feels heard and understood, their trust in the practitioner's willingness and capacity to help increases, with positive outcomes in terms of the quality of the therapeutic relationship and the patient's future engagement with health services. The moral value of curiosity here is that, by demonstrating their engagement, practitioners manifest their commitment to viewing patients not just as problems to solve but as agents with a valuable perspective to share.

In a recent project on how to preserve agency in young people using mental health emergency services, video-recorded clinical encounters were analyzed by experts in philosophy, psychology, psychiatry, and also young people with experience of mental healthcare services. In the end, the recommendation was that the practitioner should commit to seeing the patient as an agent [8]. During the successful encounter, the practitioner sees the patient as a subject of experience with a perspective on the world, acknowledging that such a perspective matters. The practitioner also recognizes that the patient's concern or request for support is legitimate and deserves attention: the patient's concerns are not dismissed but addressed. For the practitioner, the patient is not just an object of study or a unidimensional problem to solve, but a person with a variety of needs and interests that need to be taken into account in decision making. Further, the practitioner affirms the patient's capacity to contribute to positive change and does not exclude the patient from the process of decision making, leading to potential treatment options. In practice, this might mean that the practitioner is willing to explain the advantages and disadvantages of the available treatment options to the patient and elicit the patient's views about such options.

Genuine curiosity accompanied by attentive and empathetic listening underpins all the communication techniques contributing to a successful encounter, including the validation of the person's experiences, the legitimization of the person's concerns, the lack of objectification of the person, the affirmation of the person's capacity to contribute to positive change, and the person's involvement in decision making. Validation, which is the first step towards the adoption of the agential stance, can be practically manifested by asking open questions motivated by genuine curiosity about the person's perspective.

4.2. Curiosity against Polarization: "What Is Your Story?"

The second case we explore is an interaction where there is substantial difference in worldviews between interpreter and speaker, and the exchange risks becoming unproductive and polarized—this is sometimes characterized as *deep disagreement*. It is both an epistemic and moral benefit if each party expresses curiosity about how the other party arrived at their view of the world because the ensuing understanding can help build bridges between the radically different views and increase mutual understanding. Ultimately, mutual understanding may prevent an impasse where the original views become radicalized and more ingrained, and the exchange has no positive outcome.

When people hold different values and express incompatible identity beliefs, the exchange can become difficult, compromising the possibility of a productive dialogue and resulting in the speaker's views becoming even more ingrained and irreconcilable with those of the interpreter. In these situations, merely offering positive arguments for one's position and raising objections against the opponent's position do not help overcome the impasse. The cycle of statement, objection, and response can be met by rigidity and defensiveness and is unlikely to encourage opponents to consider the merits of alternative positions. Moreover, the effectiveness of that cycle is hostage to the assumption that interpreter and speaker share the same values and the same methodological assumptions about what counts as good evidence for the positions in the debate. However, this is not always the case. For a cherished position to be given up, that is, a position recognized as

central to the person's own system of beliefs, the very idea of what counts as good evidence against that position needs to be revisited as well.

Take climate change denialism as an example. Claire has been a denialist for ages. In order for her to admit that human actions have played a role in climate change, on the basis of the evidence from climate science presented by her opponent, Claire would have to believe that climate scientists can be trusted. However, denialism is often based on the conviction that the official source of information (in this case, climate science) is not to be trusted due to its being unreliable and corrupt. As a result, the data provided by such a source are downgraded by Claire to non-evidence. A denialist like Claire would not accept the latest climate science projections as evidence against her position, unless something caused significant parts of her belief system to change, including those relevant to determining which type of information counts as genuine evidence in the debate [23]. For Claire's opponent's argument to be persuasive, the scientific data earlier dismissed by Claire as a fabrication or as a piece of propaganda would have to be upgraded to evidence, evidence sufficient to accept the claim that humans are partly responsible for climate change. As previously mentioned, positions on climate change and other topical and political issues may be entangled with people's values and identities, so other changes in Claire's worldview may be necessary as well for her to be disposed to accept the opponent's position.

What does it mean that some beliefs are *identity beliefs*? Identity encompasses those aspects of a person that acquire a special significance because the person takes pride in them or feels that they are central to how they are or want to be [24]. These aspects are relatively stable. Entrenched positions people have on religion, politics, morality, and so on, are shaped by and reflect their values and commitments. Take attitudes to COVID-19 vaccine mandates as an example. Refusing the COVID-19 vaccine and viewing vaccine mandates as part of a conspiracy will make sense to a person who already mistrusts the government and pharmaceutical companies and generally opposes invasive medical interventions. Suppose Omari has refused the vaccine and protested against mandates during the pandemic on the basis of the belief that vaccines are ineffective and unsafe. Omari also suspects that the government and the healthcare authorities must have some ulterior motive to push vaccination. In order for Omari to change his mind and accept the offer of a vaccine, it is not enough that he talks to someone who cites a science paper or a reputable source confirming the protective role of the COVID-19 vaccine and denying its risks. That is because Omari's attitude towards the vaccine is only a small part of his general outlook on life. In order for him to change his mind and agree that getting the vaccine is a good idea, Omari would have to change the way he sees and presents himself. From a vaccine sceptic he needs to become a person who is open minded about vaccines.

So, what can people do when an exchange of arguments fails to bring about progress in a debate? A proposal is that interpreter and speaker need to find a common ground, even when they start from different views and values. Such common ground is more likely to be something that involves *how they feel* and *what they care about* than what they have arguments for. In *How Minds Change* David McRaney offers an overview of the psychological science aimed at disclosing how people give up beliefs that were very important to them for an extended period of time, beliefs that capture some of their values, are laden with emotions, determine their behavior, and are relatively stable. McRaney is interested in the theory behind the "conversions" that people experience when they leave a cult or abandon a conspiracy theory [25]. However, he is also asking whether the theory can explain the success of some techniques that have been used to get people to distance themselves from their ingrained beliefs: *deep canvassing* and *street epistemology* among others.

Deep canvassing is a technique aimed at identifying some standards for respectful conversations with people who report a fixed position. The main recommendation is for interpreters to learn about the experiences surrounding the content of the speakers' position: the conversation becomes an exchange of emotionally and personally significant events that are explored together and that reveal the values of interpreter and speaker. In

the conversation, then, there is no longer an exchange of arguments, but an exchange of *stories*. Participants talk about how they came to their position on the relevant issue and why that position has now become so important to them. By sharing the reasons why that particular position occupies such a special place in their worldview and self-conception, the opportunity arises to extend the common ground between participants in the exchange.

Whereas the exchange of arguments is finalized to persuade the opponent that they are wrong, the exchange of stories is primarily aimed at making better sense of the other person's perspective. Asking about the other person's experiences and personally significant stories is again an expression of the interpreter's genuine curiosity about the speaker. This curiosity motivates the interpreter to inquire about the speaker's view and how that view was formed. It also motivates an inquiry into the emotional significance of that perspective. Virtuous curiosity here is not just a disposition to attain information about the speaker. It is important to exercise good judgement and practical wisdom in order to avoid insensitive questioning, as discussed earlier with respect to the question where someone is from. If the interpreter is genuinely interested in knowing how the speaker formed beliefs and opinions and is also skilled and wise in questioning, valuable information will be sought without intrusiveness. This may require the interpreter giving some gentle pushbacks without judging or alienating the speaker, and raising the possibility of different points of view without imposing their own.

Trading stories may be a more productive strategy than exchanging arguments in this particular context, because the stories about how people grew attached to their positions show how such positions often emerged as reactions to situations that were difficult to manage. The realization that the speaker was facing a challenge when their view was formed encourages interpreters to be empathetic and facilitates mutual understanding. Maybe speaker and interpreter encountered similar challenges, but they developed radically different strategies to overcome such challenges. Thus, the exchange may reveal an unexpected common ground: there was a problem to be faced. This shows how the sharing of personally significant experiences prompted by genuine curiosity may unite interpreters and speakers whereas arguments divide them. In this context, curiosity has epistemic benefits, because important information comes to the surface that helps people reach a better understanding of each other's positions. But curiosity has also moral benefits. As in the practitioner and patient interaction during a clinical encounter, also in the case of the interaction between two people with radically different worldviews, the newly acquired information about the speaker prevents the interpreter from objectifying the speaker. The speaker is not just the supporter of a bad argument, a conspiracy theorist, a climate change denialist, or an anti-vaxxer. They are people who have a variety of interests and personally significant experiences. Those interests and experiences shaped how they now think and feel about some important issues that affect everyone in society.

In the interaction between people with different identity beliefs, newly acquired information about the speaker can also the interpreter from pathologizing the speaker's mental life. The opponent is no longer deemed "irrational", "delusional", or "out of their minds", because now it is clear that the views they endorse were endorsed for a reason. For the interpreter, the speaker's views may still be wrong, misguided, even dangerous. But now they have become more understandable. The interpreter may not share the speaker's reasons or may not judge them as good reasons to hold that particular view, but has now the resources available to empathize with the speaker. As one way to attain information that can be used to enhance understanding and avoid polarization, curiosity may lead to more respectful, productive, and empathetic exchanges.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, we have endeavored to vindicate curiosity as a virtue in two ways. We have agreed with the philosophers who describe curiosity as a virtue. We have shown that, even when the disposition to seek new information fails to be an epistemic virtue, it may not amount to a vice without the intervention of another objectionable trait such

as malevolence. We have also argued that curiosity can be both an epistemic and moral virtue and that this becomes apparent when the disposition to attain new information concerns information about our fellow agents. To support the idea that curiosity has moral as well as epistemic benefits, we have presented two cases of social interactions where curiosity plays an important role: it promotes mutual understanding. In both cases, not only does curiosity benefit agents epistemically as they attain worthwhile information that they would not have attained otherwise, but it also sustains a better engagement with other agents, independent of how different they may be in status, experience, and perspective. Curiosity does not eliminate disagreement but helps us see other people as agents with a valuable perspective to share. Thus, developing and cultivating curiosity are promising ways to create the foundations for more effective and epistemically just communication.

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